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This paper explores the concept of the heirloom through attachments to objects, imagery and processes. I incorporate traditional methods of craft such as crochet and ceramics, as well as materials including silk flowers, plastic plates, and plastic recyclables to emphasize this topic. My use of a variety of media calls for an examination of the perception of materials and the meaning and hierarchies of value often associated with them. Throughout my exploration of materials I often enlist the use of the flower as metaphor. The works that I produced for the 2014 MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, on view April 26 through June 1, 2014, support the proposals put forth in this document.

STUDIO CRAFT AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE HEIRLOOM

by

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Approved by

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## CHAPTER I

### STUDIO CRAFT AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE HEIRLOOM

**heirloom** | ˈe(ə)r ˌloʊm |

**noun**

**a valuable object that has belonged to a family for several generations.**

This of course is the simplest of definitions. The heirloom can be an object, but can also be associated with tradition and heritage. It is our connection to these objects and the circumstances surrounding them that reveal emotional attachments as well as tangible ones. I am exploring material and cultural value, the affirmation of labor, and the role of the artist's hand in the production of these objects. But more broadly, I use the context of "handing down" objects as a reflection of what we will leave behind.

A custom built wall of glass front cabinets sat at the far end of my grandmother Ada's farmhouse kitchen. Inside contained the treasures she had accumulated over her lifetime, each one attached to a memory of a special time or person in her life. They ranged from various types of depression glass and decorative plates that had been passed on to her from departed relatives to a delftware windmill she had purchased in Holland on her only trip out of the country; she came to visit my family while we were living in Germany. As a child I

would pull up the kitchen stool to peer through the glass and study these disparate items. They were so precious to a woman who otherwise lived an unadorned life. One day I noticed a delicate teacup with the month of April gold-leafed on its surface and mentioned how beautiful I thought it was to my grandmother. She stopped what she was doing, came over to the cabinet, and removed the teacup and matching saucer. Ada turned the plate upside down and I saw my name was written on a piece of tape attached to the bottom. She explained, someday this would be mine because we both celebrated our birthdays in the month of April. Then she revealed that every item she had so carefully collected all these years had a family member's name placed on the underside; each was to be dispersed when she was no longer with us. And so they were.

With these memories so clear in my recollection, my multi-media work explores the concept of the heirloom through attachments to objects, imagery, and processes. I incorporate traditional methods of craft such as crochet and ceramics, as well as materials including silk flowers, plastic plates, and plastic recyclables to emphasize this topic. My use of a variety of media calls for an examination of the perception of materials and the meanings and hierarchies of value often associated with them. Throughout my exploration of materials I often enlist the use of the flower as metaphor.

I grew up in rural Perry County, Pennsylvania for the most part. But I spent my early years on an Army Base in Frankfurt, Germany and had the opportunity to travel throughout Europe while my family was stationed there for three years. Whether it was the endless and gloriously colored tulip fields of Holland, the wildflowers that covered the countryside of Berchtesgaden, or the intoxicating fragrance of funerary spreads, which at the age of ten I found so overwhelming at my father's funeral, lingering childhood memories of flowers and their associations have greatly impacted my art work.

Though I had been using the flower in many of my previous works, it was *Beware of the Ides of March* (2012) which I created at the end of my first semester in the MFA program, that I realized exploring my personal attachments to objects and methods of craft, such as crochet, contained universal themes that are relatable to many viewer's own experiences (Fig. 1). This work was based on my memories of my father's death and the healing bond of the family structure. The fluorescent floral banner symbolizes the rose funerary spread that covered my father's casket and the numerous floral arrangements that made their way into my grandparent's living room after the funeral. The pungent smell felt as though it would knock me out by the sheer number of flowers contained in such a small place. The crochet web, unpainted silk flowers, and yarn forms represent the transition of our family afterward as we relied on the ability to rebuild our lives through the support of our extended family. I was encouraged at the end of first semester review to continue exploring personal experiences through my art.



After spending time reflecting over personal experiences and identifying subjects that were important to me, I realized that the parallel universes of motherhood, artist, contractor, and feminist merge together in my work in a manner that makes larger public social context collide with more private domesticity. After working as a gallery director in Boston, a Design/Build contractor, and becoming a mother of two daughters, I felt compelled to begin using materials from the home that are often overlooked or discarded as starting points for my work. By using silk flowers, crochet, zip ties, and even plastic recyclables, I aim to question “high art” materials and the value ascribed to everyday objects, while trying to blur the distinctions between art and craft. Making my artist’s mark with these materials also embraces the positive aspects of women’s history as makers and references the domestic sphere.

My sculpture, *Cultural Kudzu* (2013) references a culture that has adopted a princess mentality for our daughters (Fig.2). Crochet and beaded ribbon kudzu tentacles overtake the sculptural form. The pure scale and abundance of the monochromatic pink of the piece is an overwhelming spectacle but is approachable because of the somewhat nostalgic crochet form. Many of us have connections or memories of grandmothers or aunts making blankets or scarves and passing them on to family members, so the recognition of the method seems familiar even though the form is unexpected.

Other artists employing eclectic materials such as Petah Coyne, Marya Kazoun, and Joana Vasconcelos influence my work. Though our conceptual

basis is quite different, I share with them a baroque sensibility and use materials that reinforce the message of the work. It was my experience of Vasconcelos's work at the Venice Biennale that encouraged me to continue my exploration of material choices and considerations of scale. Her *Trafaria Praia* "floating pavilion" utilized a decommissioned ferryboat as a moving installation. Traditional hand-painted tile represented a modern view of Lisbon and covered the exterior of the boat. Below deck she continued the blue and white color scheme, where a textile and light installation engulfed the viewer. I found her use of these "every-day" materials compelling because of my own similar interests.

### **The Crafting of Art and the Value in Being a Maker**

Perhaps my ideas about craft are drawn from my early memories of seeing my grandparents on their farm. Watching them work with their hands in an attempt to achieve the highest outcome, especially because of their formidable work ethic, instilled a strong association between hard work and quality in my mind. The very nature of craft is bound to the mark of the hand and to the process of working and being a maker. For me, the most fundamental idea of craft is the record of the process and what happens in my studio between the material and myself. Though there is no utilitarian purpose to the work I choose to make, I employ the technical aspects of skillfulness often associated with craftsmanship and materials related with craft. Through this process I wish to call attention to the western need to name and categorize the artist, craftsman

or artisan, which I believe is linked to both the need for understanding a thing, but also the need to deem it worthy of our attention (and therefore our money). Such attempts to categorize are elitist and tied strongly to a capitalist style of economy. Why are the visual arts so tied to these distinctions and yet a musician is always a musician and a writer is always a writer? I do believe however that these boundaries are becoming blurred as the use of traditional craft materials are being explored more and more by working artists.

*Extra/Ordinary; Craft and Contemporary Art* explores these issues through a series of essays. In M. Anna Fariello's essay "Making and Naming, The Lexicon of Studio Craft", she states:

There is no clear line partitioning craft from art, like a highway sign that marks the state line: You are now leaving the world of Art and entering the brave new world of Craft (Fariello, 24).

This hierarchy of craft and art was not always the case, but with the Industrial Revolution the factory took over disciplines such as weaving and furniture production and removed the "hand" from the equation. To its detriment, Craft implied something that was produced in quantity while Art maintained its delineation as a rarified form. Fariello continues:

My own view of the craft/art continuum is on a sliding scale, with imagination and skill as part of every creative act. Art is imagination, with or without skill; craft is skill, with or without imagination. Studio Craft – the best term we have thus far – identifies a particular point on this continuum, the place where imagination and vision meet skill and craftsmanship (Fariello, 40).

Fariello's description is inline with my own beliefs. Studio Craft is about intention and creating something designed to evoke an emotional response and is very different than crafting a beautiful functional piece. However, if that piece evokes an emotional response through its materials and execution of skill, then maybe it is also artfully crafted. My own purposeful use of traditional crafting materials such as crochet, embroidery, and silk flowers, along with utilitarian components such as plastic plates and zip ties, allows me to reference the home and the domestic. However, it is my approach to those materials that is most relevant. With each stitch, mark or flower placement the viewer becomes aware of the process and the presence of the maker as well as the competence of working with such materials.

A trigger for this current body of work came about from viewing *A Very Light Art* at Venice's Ca' Rezzonico Museum. The exhibition curated by Cornelia Lauf, featured work by seven artists that she asked to create new, decorative pieces specifically for the venue. Lauf explains:

Their lamps, mobiles and objects fuse effortlessly with the Ca'Rezzonico surroundings. It is contemporary art in smooth continuation of its ancient duties. Art as decor, or as altarpiece- the artist as artisanal craftsman and master of ceremonies- these long-discounted roles are brought back to life in an elegant and simple scenario conceived specifically for the premiere collection of painting and decorative arts in Venice (Lauf).

I was completely intrigued by Lauf's seamless merging of the functional with the decorative and the changing role of the artisan throughout history. The exhibition showcased some objects that were functional and others that were strictly

decorative against a backdrop of the highly ornate interior of the former palace. I wanted to expand that concept by using materials drawn from the home, usually with a utilitarian purpose. My objective became to skillfully transform the material so that it conceals its origin initially, but then reveals itself upon closer investigation.

My series of plastic plates *Quasi-Delft Bequest* (2014) challenges preconceived notions of material worth and a more extensive breadth of an heirloom (Fig. 3). This series of permanent marker drawings depicts traditional Delft designs along with contemporary subject matter and landscapes on plastic plates and poses conflicting messages of artistry, craft, and collecting through the use of a “disposable” material. The idea of this “collection” being handed down to heirs also speaks to the consumption of resources, accumulation of household objects, and a broader context of what we will leave behind for the next generation. The use of the Delftware designs reinforces the conflict of authenticity and the economic value of the art while challenging the use of historical patterning for the sake of decoration. The Dutch city of Delft made earthenware to imitate the costly Ming porcelain imported from China during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Though initially seen as affordable replicas, the fine craftsmanship of the Delftware made it collectable in its own right.

There is no doubt that I am also using craft’s associations with nostalgia as references in my own work. *Ada’s Family Ties* (2014) offers a direct correlation to my memory of my grandmother coming in to the house after

working all day milking cattle and harvesting crops (Fig.4). She would often sit quietly and crochet the most delicate doilies. My use of zip ties and the shadows created by them replicates the delicate handy-work of crochet. Doing so designates the utilitarian object as decorative and encourages the viewer to find beauty in the pragmatic items of everyday.

My own interest in craft as a practice in studio art is summed up nicely in Julia Bryan-Wilson's essay "Preaching, Performance, and Process" that accompanies the exhibition catalog *40 Under 40: Craft Futures*. She writes,

Craft has long been a tool of community formation, as well as a form of activism, spanning the ideological gamut from patriotic sewing circles to antiwar knitting demonstrations. How is craft implicated in a wider body-the social body, or what could be called the body politic? For feminists, queer folk, and people of color, craft has been an important survival strategy. It is a resource for identity formation and for collective organizing, not least because it is a method to re-envision, reinvent, or rediscover lost histories (Wilson, 46).

Through my use of craft I am reinforcing the position that there are important connections between how society views women and the underclass and how it treats the natural environment. I hope to explore this interconnectedness of American habits of resource consumption and the consequences that arise with this practice. I will also continue to combine historical research and material experimentation to further my creative investigation into women's issues.

## Flower as a Reoccurring Theme

The idea and metaphorical use of the flower, blossom, and bloom intertwines with the female persona throughout history and, certainly, art history. The sole purpose of a flower is reproduction, and for that purpose, the flower is a plausible symbol for the female body at its most rudimentary interpretation. Clearly, this association has been made when taking into account the intention of the flower to attract for the sake of the plant's propagation, as well as its aesthetic similarities to female genitalia.

The symbolism of flowers reflects many of my own conceptual fixations with the dichotomies they represent; they connote life and death, celebration and mourning. Furthermore, the contrast between femininity and masculinity is embedded in the gendered identification of flower as female and its propagator as male. When telling the analogous story of the birds and the bees, there is little doubt as to who is the bird or bee and who is the flower. Semantics tell us that when we talk about flowers we are deep within the territory of gender politics. Our culture genders flowers, so do these preconceived notions also affect our views of flowers as form and image in art?

In the series of sculptural works *Cherished Tchotchke Knows Her Place* (2013-14) I amplify the use of the flower as a feminine identifier in these compositions (Figs. 5-6). The absurdly colossal floral arrangements in the antique head vases signify the equally preposterous premise of these found objects. These ceramic forms were mass-produced after World War II as the

quintessential ideal of the feminine. These were not so subtle reminders to the women who had found work in the factories during the war of their proper place and the ladylike persona that they should strive to achieve. I suggest this one-dimensional facade further through the application of monochromatic color palettes.

The art world has not always so eagerly embraced the flower as motif. Even though the flower and bouquet paintings became quite popular in the early 1600s, the Academy frowned upon painting nature and still life, which were seen only as an exercise to build skills and relegated to a feminine pastime. A famous quotation from the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1860 supports this misogynist attitude:

Male genius has nothing to do with female taste. Let men of genius conceive of great architectural projects, monumental sculptures, and elevated forms of painting. In a word, let men busy themselves with all that has to do with great art. Let women occupy themselves with those kinds of art they have always preferred... the painting of flowers, those prodigies of grace and freshness which alone can compete with the grace and freshness of women themselves. (Holm, 13).

Though this statement makes me want to reject the flower as subject with every ounce of feminist blood boiling in my body, I regain my composure knowing that the status of the flower in art has been transformed throughout modern history. Of course, in a patriarchal society such change does not usually occur until men embrace a topic as their own. From the still life paintings of the Dutch “masters”



to the Impressionistic roses of Claude Monet, representing flowers has become more accepted as an art form.

Once again I reclaim the still life for my subject and “occupy” myself with the art I prefer. Currently, I seek to examine and encourage social change through my work. For *Brueghel's Baroque* (2014) *Red Cup Still Life* (2014) and *Deluge* (2014) I gathered one month's recyclables for each composition from our family's household bin and manipulated them into floral forms that I composed in the tradition of the Dutch still life “masters” (Figs. 7-9). Just as seventeenth-century Dutch floral paintings were produced in such numbers that they were an inexpensive alternative to the costly real thing brought on by the burgeoning bulb industry, my contemporary plastic arrangements could serve as the alternative to the disappearing landscape caused by climate change and the overindulgences of an excessive society. They suggest a link between the present and something past that has been “passed down” to the next generation.

Much in the way Yinka Shonibare presents juxtapositions across material, form, and subject matter, I strive to implement similar principles in my own practice. Though he addresses issues related to race, class, the colonial, and the colonized, and I view my work as typifying the underrepresented, discarded, disregarded, and domestic, we both show relationships between the historical and the contemporary and elude to the destructive patterns of human behavior that repeat themselves over time. *The Swing (after Fragonard)* is one of Shonibare's best-known sculptural works. It depicts a young woman at her

leisure swinging high with complete abandonment. His use of highly textured and lush materials draws the viewer in through the attractive aesthetic, only to discover the strong statements about the aristocracy during the French Revolution and the redistribution of power. I utilize a similar aesthetic and historical context through my material selection and use of the flower with an intention to provoke a sense of irony in the viewer's response.

The floral image maintains its feminine role in contemporary art today. Certainly we have lost a lot of the Victorian-era meanings of specific flowers, but the broader connections to life, death, fertility and reproduction continue to persevere throughout artistic expression and certainly throughout my own artistic pursuits. They are a means for me to connect my conceptual message to the variety of forms and media in which I choose to work. There is certainly a potent "feminine" quality to all of my work because of its lush and abundant materials, but also because of my continued use of the flower. I do not see this as a derogatory term, but instead as an identifier to the artist as female. This is a quality I embrace as a woman, maker, and feminist.

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Figure 1. *Beware the Ides of March*, 2012  
enamel, silk flowers, shattered glass and yarn  
44" x 38" x 6"



Figure 2. *Cultural Kudzu*, 2013  
silk flowers, enamel, yarn, beads, ribbon and plaster  
80" x 48" x 40"





Figure 3. *Quasi-Delft Bequest* (series) and detail, 2013-14  
 permanent marker on plastic plates  
 (installation and plate size varies)



Figure 4. *Ada's Family Ties*, 2014  
zip ties  
87" x 87"





Figure 5. *Cherished Tchotchke Knows Her Place (gold)*, 2014  
silk flowers, ceramic vase, gold leaf, enamel, wood and concrete block  
65" x 15.5" x 15.5"



Figure 6. *Cherished Tchotchke Knows Her Place (violet)*, 2014  
silk flowers, ceramic vase, enamel, and plywood  
63" x 16" x 16"



Figure 7. *Brueghel's Baroque*, 2014  
household melted and formed plastic recyclables, resin and found frame  
27" x 22.5" x 7"





Figure 8. *Red Cup Still Life*, 2014  
melted and formed plastic recyclables, resin and steel  
20" x 16" x 9"



Figure 9. *Deluge*, 2014  
ceramic, steel and melted and formed plastic recyclables  
42" x 28" 25"